

7/3/97 Branch Article

**Karen Branch, *Voting Districts to be Chosen Today*,
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Voting districts to be chosen today

By KAREN BRANCH
Herald Staff Writer

Miami commissioners will mold the city's and their own political futures today, as they meet to choose a map of single-member commission districts — and define the powers of an executive mayor.

They'll review two new maps today: a five- and a seven-district plan.

Knowing voters will have the final word Sept. 4 on the plan they choose today, commissioners say a five-member body is more politically palatable.

"People are very upset about government and more government," Commissioner Willy Gort said. "We've got to make sure we can get something that can pass."

But black leaders back a seven-district map.

It provides for two majority-black seats — one more than a five-seat plan — and would likely resolve a lawsuit against Miami. Last fall, a church-based group sued when elections left Miami without a black commissioner for the first time in 30 years.

"I hope the commission will consider the seven as a good, fair compromise," said Donna Ballman, People United to Lead the Struggle for Equality's lawyer.

A seven-member map could be drawn that would likely elect officials who exactly mirror Miami's ethnic census picture of 62 percent Hispanic, 25 percent black and 12 percent white. The likely electoral outcome, given that Miami voters historically cast ballots along ethnic lines: a Hispanic mayor and a commission of four Hispanics, two blacks and one white non-Hispanic.

The ethnic percentages: 62 percent Hispanic, 25 percent black, 12 percent white non-Hispanic.

A five-member plan would likely lead to a Hispanic mayor and a commission made up of three Hispanics, one black and one white non-Hispanic.

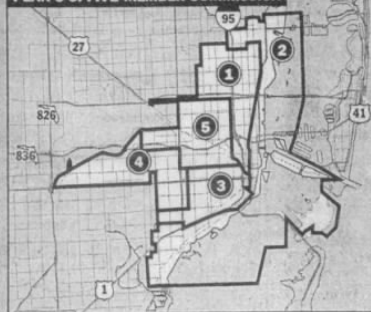
The percentages: 66 percent Hispanic, 16 percent black and 16 percent white non-Hispanic.

That scenario would leave the

PROPOSED DISTRICTS

Miami Commissioners meet today to review two proposed maps for single-member commission seats — drawn by districting experts Rudolph Wilson, a political science professor at Norfolk State University, and Professor Allan Lichtman, history department chairman at American University. The meeting begins at 7 a.m. at City Hall, 3500 Pan American Dr. The commission is expected to vote on a plan, which will be forwarded to voters for their final say in a Sept. 4 referendum. Below are the ethnic breakdowns* by percentage of the voting-age (18 and over) population in each district:

PLAN 5-3: FIVE-MEMBER COMMISSION



Ethnic breakdown for plan 5-3

| | BLACK | HISPANIC | WHITE | NON-HISPANIC |
|------------|-------|----------|-------|--------------|
| District 1 | 79% | 17% | 4% | |
| District 2 | 28% | 35% | 36% | |
| District 3 | 0.5% | 90% | 9% | |
| District 4 | 0.2% | 91% | 8% | |
| District 5 | 9% | 83% | 7% | |

*Some totals do not add up to 100 percent because other ethnic groups are not reflected.

PLAN 7-1: SEVEN-MEMBER COMMISSION



Ethnic breakdown for plan 7-1

| | BLACK | HISPANIC | WHITE | NON-HISPANIC |
|------------|-------|----------|-------|--------------|
| District 1 | 81% | 15% | 3% | |
| District 2 | 57% | 34% | 8% | |
| District 3 | 23% | 32% | 44% | |
| District 4 | 0.7% | 92% | 7% | |
| District 5 | 5% | 89% | 6% | |
| District 6 | 0.3% | 92% | 7% | |
| District 7 | 0.4% | 90% | 9% | |

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black population underrepresented — and the Hispanic and white non-Hispanic populations overrepresented.

But Miami commissioners also have other numbers running through their minds as they contemplate their decision today.

Miami is in the midst of a "financial emergency" and has undergone cutbacks and fee hikes to ward off a projected \$68 million budget shortfall. Budget director Dipak Parekh estimates a seven-member commission would cost at least \$619,352 more the first year than the current five-member commission.

And that doesn't count the cost

— in either plan — of the salary and budget for an executive mayor.

Critics of a seven-member plan say financial skittishness over the costs of bigger government would also trickle down to a live-or-die issue on the Sept. 4 ballot: "Shall the City of Miami retain its existence as a municipality and not be abolished...?"

"I would very much want the City of Miami to be an entity the next year and the next," state Rep. Luis Morse, R-Miami, told commissioners Tuesday. "But in order for all you to do that, you're going to have to come up with a decision — and unfortu-

nately costs come into effect. . . . The final judge is going to be the voters of the City of Miami."

Lawyer George Knox argued that it's a matter of marketing.

"It won't sell unless you sell it," said Knox, a member of a blue-ribbon panel originally charged with recommending a plan. He prefers a seven-district map. "If the same leaders who participated in the creation of single-member districts would support and encourage it, then it's not necessarily doomed to failure. . . . But when those same people wring their hands about how impossible it will be, it's certain to fail."